focus

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ALICE TAYLOR, EDITOR

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Australia

The land "down under" has always suffered from its location. Australia is literally on the other side of the world from Europe and North America, which means that it is more than twelve thousand miles from its parent civilization, its markets, its wellspring of immigrants, and the outside military power committed to its defense.

Remoteness and an apparent lack of resources contributed to Australia's slow development. Dutch contacts with the continent in the 17th century did not arouse anyone's cupidity; "New Holland" was a barren land inhabited by primitive people. There was no ready wealth to be taken, nor was there promise of any profitable trade or development.

The voyages of Captain Cook in 1770 and thereafter served to stimulate British interest in the South Pacific, and in 1788 a penal colony was established at Botany Bay, near the present site of Sydney. Although the scene of this and other early settlement was the part of Australia most suitable for habitation, it was no Garden of Eden. The strange plants and animals offered little sustenance, and the land had never before been cultivated, so that alien crops and livestock had to be introduced and alien methods of cultivation adapted, by trial and error, to local soils and vagaries of climate.

Fortunately, the discovery that Australia was "sheep country" was made early. Once this had been confirmed, free settlers began to arrive, anticipating cheap land and cheap convict labor. Throughout Australian history wool has been the mainstay of the economy.

Between 1788 and 1851 the white population grew to 400,000. Then, close on the heels of California, Australia had its own gold rush, and its population more than doubled in the next decade. Since then, the population increase has been irregular, in response to mineral, land, or railroad booms, wars, or depressed world markets.

By 1860 the six present states of Australia—New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania—had become separate colonies or territories. A long-delayed federation took place in 1901 when the Commonwealth of Australia was formed. Today Australia consists of these six states plus the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory on the continent; southeastern New Guinea, administered as the Territory of Papua; the Trust Territory of New Guinea; and several small islands. Australia has put forth energetic efforts to secure claim to a very large slice of Antarctica and even maintains a permanent base there.

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LAND AND CLIMATE. Roughly, the continent consists of three major physiographic regions. The western half is largely a low plateau of incredibly monotonous appearance, in which huge areas are covered with regularly spaced sand ridges or rocky wastes called "gibber plains." Sinkholes or other karst formations contribute nothing to the scenery of the dead-flat Nullarbor Plain, where the transcontinental railroad runs straight as a ruler for more than three hundred miles. Prospectors roam and dig among scattered "mountains" that are mere remnants of what they were half a billion years ago. Between the western edge of the plateau and the Indian Ocean there is a narrow coastal plain cut by a few short rivers where precipitation permits.

A third of the country, not dissimilar to the plateau in appearance, consists of a north-south series of enormous drainage basins that are not set off from one another by any physical landmarks. Smallest is the part draining to the Gulf of Carpentaria. The Lake Eyre Basin, coinciding generally with the great artesian basin, is one of the largest areas of internal drainage in the world. The only river system worthy of the name on the entire continent is the Murray.

The third region consists of small mountain ranges and rugged plateaus in the east called collectively the Great Dividing Range. Elevations rarely exceed a few thousand feet, and Mt. Kosciusko, 7,305 feet, is the highest point on the continent. Along the Pacific there is a narrow belt of discontinuous coastal plain, and off most of the Queensland coast lies the remarkable 1200-mile Great Barrier Reef.

Australia's climate is, in general, hot and dry. Frost is rare, and in the more populous southern part temperatures during the winter (April to November) are comparable with those of California or the southeastern United States. Northward toward the equator the cold season becomes shorter and milder and then disappears altogether. All major cities have had shade temperatures of 100° F. or higher, and the interior and northern deserts are even hotter.

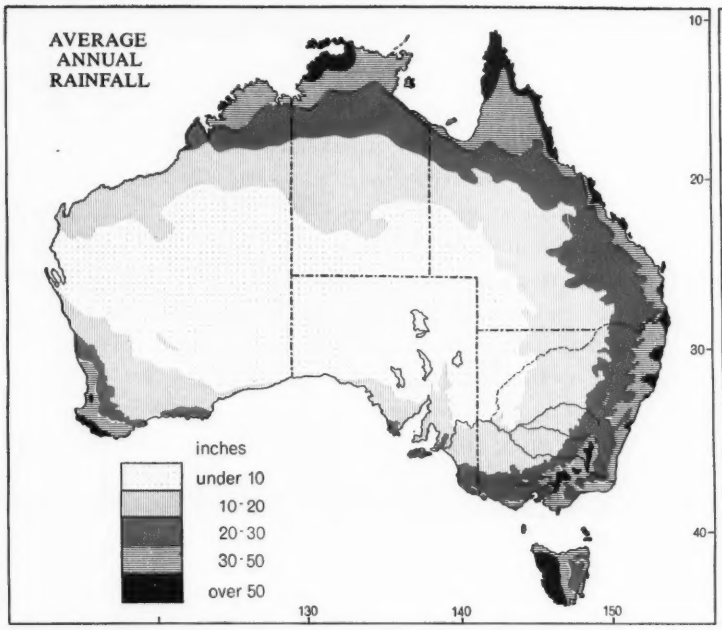
Temperatures may be comfortable or not, but the critical factor is water. Forty per cent of the continent is desert, and another 40 per cent is distinctly subhumid; of the remaining land having more than 30 inches of rain a year, parts are plagued by either an extended dry season or a useless superabundance of precipitation. A small area, comprising Victoria, Tasmania, and parts of New South Wales, has a reasonably dependable rainfall the year round.

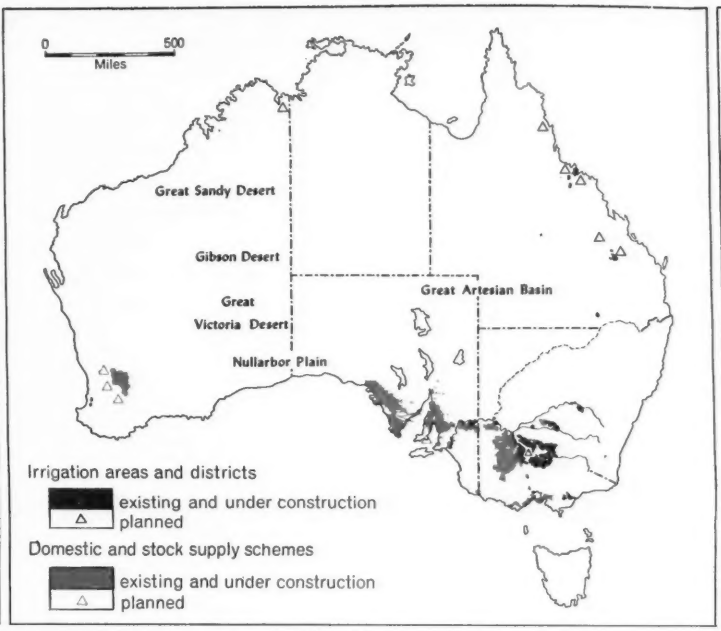
LIVESTOCK, FARMING, AND WATER. Stock raising, the foundation of Australia's economy, is concentrated in a great arc in the eastern highlands, though it spreads across poor and forbidding lands as well, where as much as 15 acres is required to support one sheep and stock must be overlanded many hundreds of miles to meat-packing plants on the coast. Here, too, the sheep-killing dingoes must be hunted, kangaroos and rabbits must be fought for the precious herbage they eat, and drought must simply be borne. (During the drought of 1944–45, the number of sheep diminished by 30 million.) In these areas life is hard for both man and beast, seeming, to the outsider, unrelievedly uncomfortable and economically precarious. Invention and governmental assistance have helped to alleviate the drawbacks of isolation by providing mail-order services, flying doctors, and the homely pedal-operated radio to take the place of the "party line," but socially and culturally the effect remains that of a series of small towns spread very thin indeed.

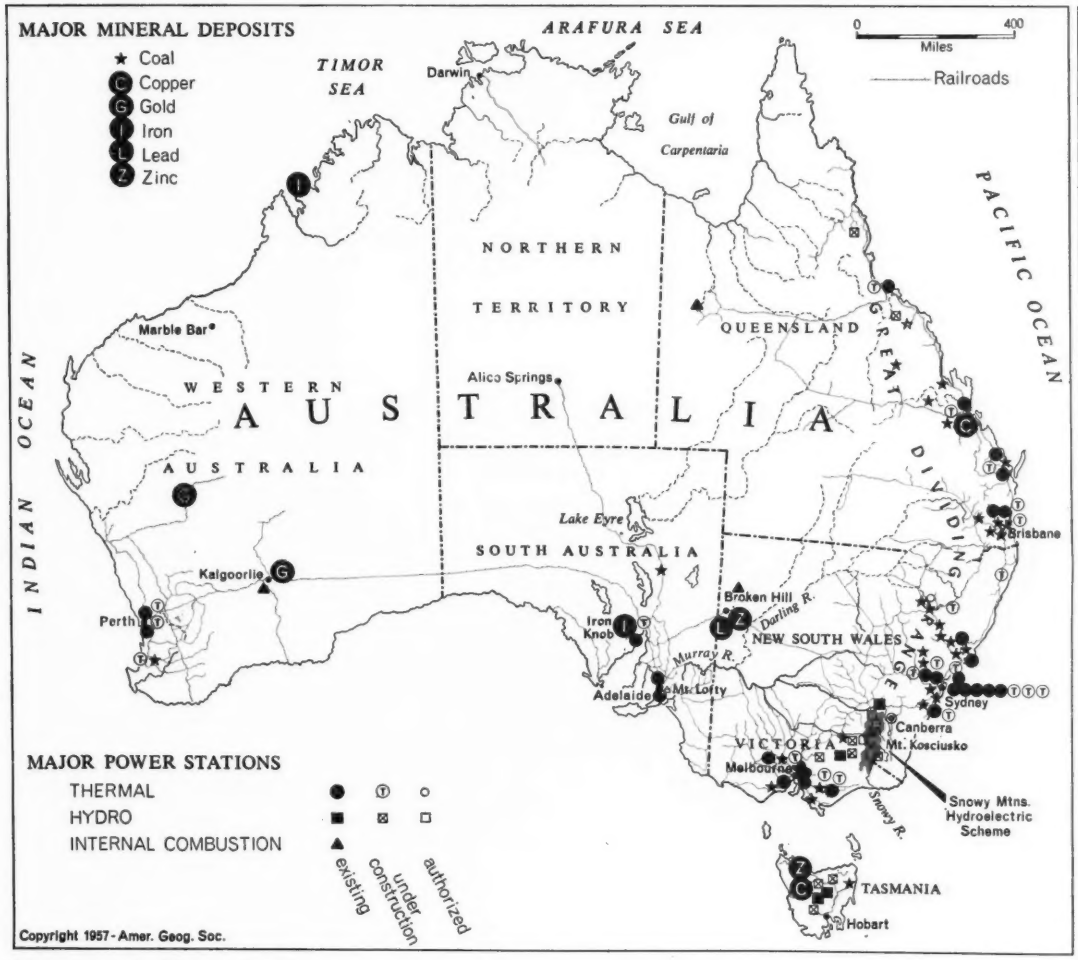
But stock raising is not typically the marginal enterprise described above. In the better lands, where rivers, artesian wells, or a few extra inches of rainfall make a great difference, the art and science of animal husbandry are as advanced as anywhere else in the world. Large, well-managed stations having improved pastures, cultivated forage crops, and careful breeding programs have produced some of the finest stock on earth.

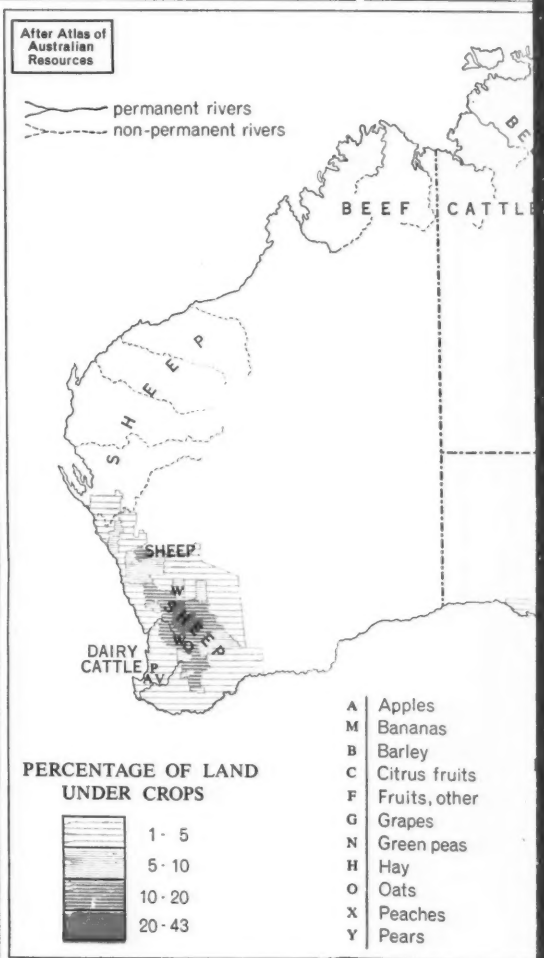
Eighty per cent of Australia's sheep are of the Merino breed, noted for its heavy wool yield; the remainder are English long-wool or mutton types. Beef and dairy cattle (the latter confined to humid or irrigated lands) are almost exclusively of English breeds, though efforts are being made to introduce breeds with Indian zebu blood for their better tolerance of heat, cattle ticks, and coarse tropical tallgrass forage, all of which prevail in northern Queensland. Australia has a total of about 130,000,000 sheep and 16,000,000 cattle, all managed by about 300,000 people. The annual wool clip is well over a billion pounds, and in 1956 wool represented 44 per cent of all exports by value. Animal products—wool, meats, dairy products, hides and skins, and live animals—made up 62 per cent of exports by value in that year, clear evidence of the dominant position of the livestock industry.

As might be expected, farming is confined to the more humid regions and to the 1,700,000 acres of









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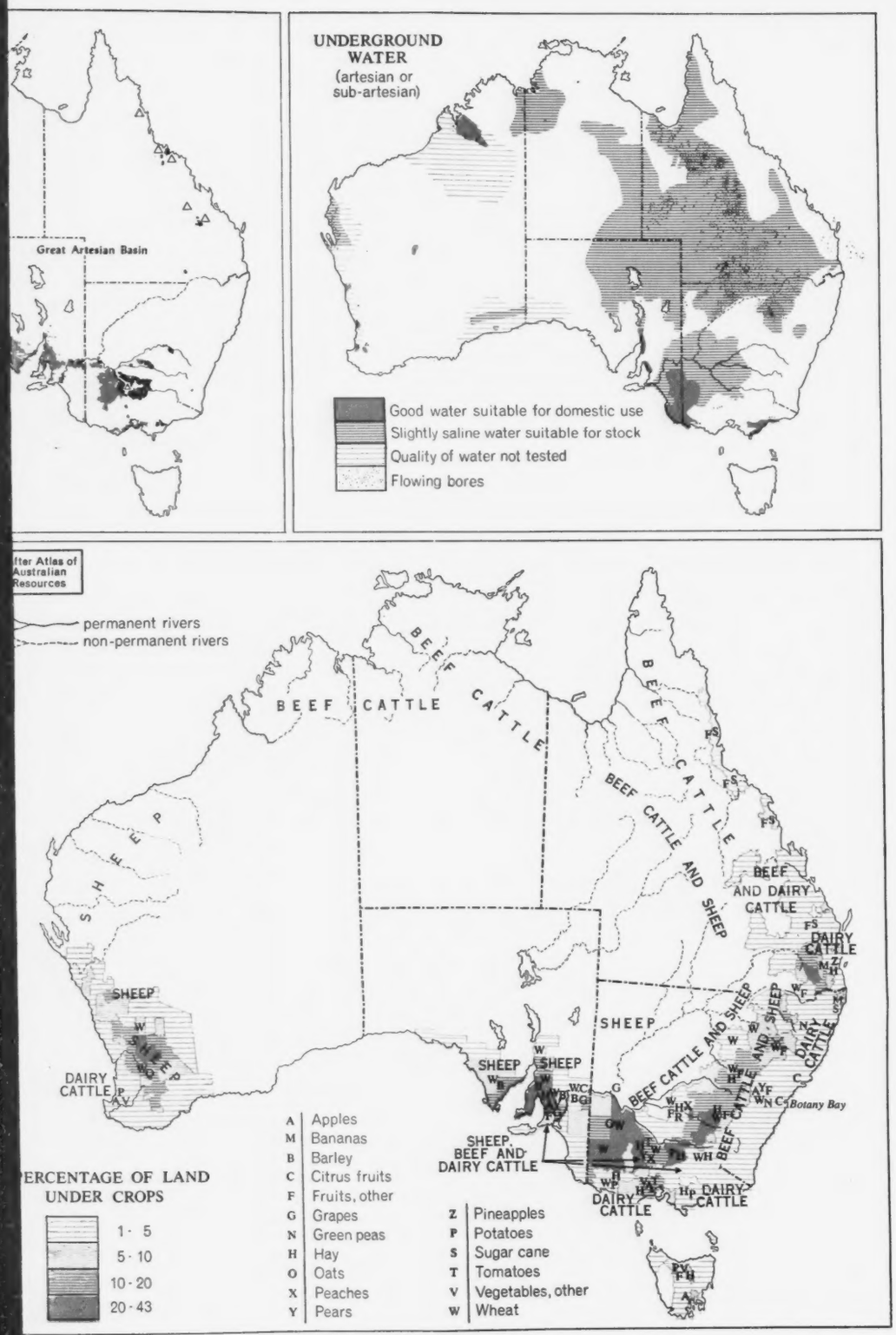

irrigated land. Grains and hay for feed occupy most of the arable land. Wheat usually ranks second only to wool on the export list, and surpluses of other grains are usual. The production of rice is being encouraged, and if it can be grown cheaply enough, there is a potential market for it in southern Asia. Market gardening is well developed near population centers, and fruits are abundant, especially in the Mt. Lofty and lower Murray Valley grape centers and the Tasmanian apple regions. Queensland has a large cane-sugar industry and produces bananas, pineapples, and other tropical crops.

Agriculture receives a great deal of tariff protection, subsidization, and other governmental assistance, without which the sugar and tobacco growers, for instance, probably could not survive. The relatively high price of labor, where labor is a major cost factor, puts the country at a disadvantage in attempting to expand overseas markets for sugar and fruits.

Despite the size of the continent, good farmland has always been at a premium, and any increase will have to be bought by expensive water-control projects. Water-supply difficulties also curb expansion of the livestock industry, but more efficient use of saline waters could be made now. Australia's most ambitious public-works project, the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme, is designed to store and divert inland some of the runoff that flows wastefully to the sea in the short, tumultuous east-coast rivers, and eventually provide some 1,800,000 acre-feet a year of irrigation water in addition to 3,000,000 kilowatts of electric power—all this several years and a billion dollars away, but smaller benefits can be expected sooner.

POWER AND MINERALS. Although there is room for expansion, Australia's hydroelectric potential is not great, owing to the general dryness. The southeast, Tasmania in particular, is best endowed, and virtually all installed capacity is there. Hydroelectric power provides about 11 per cent of the total, thermal power about 80 per cent, and internal-combustion generators the remainder. Australia is fortunate in having large supplies of good-quality coal for thermal power, but, aside from a trickle of shale oil, it is entirely dependent upon imports for petroleum products. The government is not anxious to see an increase in their consumption, yet remote areas not served by railroads will probably continue to depend on them until cheap atomic power arrives.

Coal, along with home supplies of iron and copper, has enabled the country to build up its heavy industry on a fairly solid foundation. Australia's chief mineral exports are lead and zinc; gold occupies a diminished but important place. Widespread, complex rocks of pre-Cambrian and Paleozoic origin contain almost every known metal, but extraction is, of course, dependent on economic and technological factors. Tin, tungsten, silver, and bauxite are produced in quantity, and a new industry, based on east-coast beach sands, is arising to supply the demands of advanced technology for rutile (an ore of titanium) and zircon.

TRANSPORTATION. More than any other country, Australia grew with its railroads, and they remain the backbone of its transportation system. Yet in a land where distances impose a huge transport burden and efficiency should be the watchword the railroads are disjointed by changes of gauge at state boundaries, they are generally noted for poor service, and operations are chronically "in the red."

Automobiles are expensive, so is gasoline, and the vast majority of the roads are not hard-surfaced; hence the automobile does not occupy the same place as in American life. On the other hand, there is a dense net of domestic airways, and a large proportion of long-distance travel is by air.

Coastwise shipping of bulk commodities, especially minerals, is well developed, but inland waterways simply do not exist. Virtually all foreign trade moves by sea, of course, and overseas passenger movements are increasingly by air.

POPULATION. Nine million people can hardly be said to "occupy" a continent the size of the United States. If the rural population were evenly distributed, every man, woman, and child would have a personal square mile or more. Since World War II, well over a million immigrants have come to Australia; this immigration plus natural increase has boosted the population 27 per cent since 1945, and the government expects (with mixed feelings) a further 24 per cent increase in the decade 1957–67.

So rapid an increase has conferred many benefits on the nation, but it has also imposed many strains, and debate on which outweighs the other is lively. Immigrants are overwhelmingly of working age, and many possess skills in short supply; they have substantially swollen the labor force in mining, construction, and heavy industry, doing hard work that the govern-

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ment has noticed Australians avoiding of late. On the other hand, they must be provided with an "Australian" standard of living, which is comparatively high and includes good housing, schools, and medical and social services. Spirited attempts have been made to channel new arrivals to the rural outback, where there is a shortage of agricultural labor, but people from crowded Europe are apt to find the isolation somewhat appalling. Unless they acquire farms of their own, they are likely to move back to the cities at the first opportunity.

Australians remain dominantly of British stock, though most postwar immigrants have been from the European continent. Immigration policy prefers Britishers, English-speaking whites from Commonwealth countries, Western Europeans, and Americans. The "White Australia policy" is an old one and is an indication that the nation is willing to get along without cheap plantation labor in order to avoid minority problems.

There are an estimated 47,000 full-blooded aborigines left, living on special "reserves" or scattered across the north. Some cling to their Stone Age culture, gleaning a day-to-day living without shelter, clothing, or domestic plants and animals; some live in apparent idleness near towns and missions; and others provide a useful work force on the many remote cattle or sheep stations. The most logical place for them in the future would seem to be in the animal industry.

In contrast with the harsh, lonely life of the outback, urban living and working conditions are so attractive that rural areas suffer a continual outmigration. More than half of the people on the continent live in the six state capitals, and nearly 80 per cent of the population, in the 1954 census, was considered to be urban. In view of Australia's heavy dependence upon raw-material exports and the vulnerability of its northern areas, the trend may be cause for concern.

INDUSTRY AND TRADE. Industrial expansion may have lagged before World War II, but war, postwar prosperity, and a flood of immigrants have favored it since then, and a negative sort of impetus has come from recent trade deficits. Self-sufficiency in iron and steel is not unattainable; a new aluminum refinery now fills half the nation's needs; and Australia has its own aircraft, automobile, and tractor industries and makes machinery and electrical goods and an increasing variety of consumers' goods. Construction cannot keep up with the demand for housing and new plants. There are more than a million factory workers, double the prewar number. Yet the overseas market for Australian manufactured goods is minor, and the small domestic market, miscellaneous shortages, the high overhead of a welfare state, and the unspectacular efficiency of factory labor conspire to push costs to the point where strong protectionist measures are necessary.

Inflation and an unfavorable balance of trade are the two recurring economic problems. Inflationary pressure has been constant and more severe than in the United States, and the Australian appetite for imports frequently and sometimes seriously exceeds the value of exports. Import restrictions are the rule. More than half of both import and export trade is with the sterling area; more than a third of both is with the United Kingdom. In 1955–56, Australia's second-largest customer was Japan, followed by France, the United States, New Zealand, West Germany, and Italy. The United Kingdom and the United States supplied more than half of all imports, and West Germany was the third most important source. Total trade in 1955–56 comprised exports worth £784 million and imports of £821 million; the deficit of £37 million is, nonetheless, about half the 1954–55 deficit.

The country is striving toward a higher degree of self-sufficiency in necessities, a larger population, and a better standard of living for everyone. The prospects for attainment of all these aims seem good.

SUSAN HUCK

Miss Huck has been a lecturer in geography at Washington College, Chestertown, Md.

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